

Know the cost of grazed grass and find a summer system that suits your herd

Summertime – and the living is easy?

Summer milk production places producers into four categories depending mainly on the grazing potential of their land. Land rental, fertiliser and concentrate prices are all putting a huge drain on cash-flow during the summer months. So how can producers offset this by maximising their potential?

text **Allison Matthews**

The traditional system of milk production – before the trend towards total mixed rations – was dominated by the use of concentrates in the parlour and grazed grass by day and night. And as milk yields rose and cheaper concentrates became available, more complicated systems of feeding cows developed.

“Grazing systems now range from an all-or-nothing status in an economy that is putting a great strain on the need to conserve forages for the winter ahead,” says Thompsons’ ruminant specialist James Black.

Modern producers can be placed into the following four areas of summer milk production: grazing night and day; housed night and day; one group grazing by day and housed at night; and two groups of cows with low yielders grazing night and day and high yielders either fully or partially housed.

“Grazed grass has the potential to provide more than 20 litres of milk on a complete grazing system but on a herd basis, and in particular with staler cows, this is rarely achieved. Swards should be maintained as if grass were a crop and emphasis placed on grazing nutritious young swards that maximise intake and nutrient contribution,” says Mr Black.

Table 1: Forage and concentrate costs 2011

	cash cost (£/t utilisable DM)	full economic cost (£/t utilisable DM)
grazed grass	53	97
forage maize	69	126
wholecrop wheat	84	147
silage (three cuts)	78	139
concentrates	287	294
forage maize	69	126

“Thompsons’ Milk Manager financial costing service summer figures show the best yielding herds on a complete grazing system are yielding more than 14 litres from grass during the summer period. Not as good as the potential, but still contributing significantly towards profit,” he adds. As levels of concentrates or conserved forages increase in the daily diet, increased milk sales must be achieved to offset the increased production costs.

Cost increases

Cows yielding more than 35 litres are always a challenge to feed and the introduction of lush, high protein grass is never easy to balance, particularly if weather conditions are not ideal. As concentrates have increased in price more producers are questioning where grass, and at what inclusion level, fits into their system,” says McMinn Independent Financial Consultancy’s Jason McMinn.

“Forages are not immune to cost increases – just take a look at the figures in table 1 – and concentrate feeding needs to be targeted to ensure that milk production is profitable,” warns Mr McMinn.

“Thought should also be given to the labour requirements to look after housed cows, such as time spent on ration preparation and slurry removal. All factors that stack up against housing lower yielding cows,” adds Mr Black.

“Cows giving more than 35 litres can remain profitable in a housed system assuming good quality forage is available and a frugal eye is kept on concentrate feed rates. This system also maintains milk yields when weather conditions do not allow for ideal grazing conditions.

“It is unquestionable that with lower yielding herds, or the lower yielding portion of any herd, that grass should feature as the main forage in the diet this summer. Cows with daily yields of fewer than 30 litres can perform profitably with grazed grass in the diet.”

Circumstances on each yard dictate options for the grazing season. Factors such as grazing hectareage, calving pattern, labour availability, grazing infrastructure and producer attitude are key areas for concern when deciding what system provides the best fit to progress.

Full-time grazing

Mr McMinn provides a word of warning when decisions are being made: “With the current concentrate prices it will not be profitable to house lower yielding cows by day or night. The partial or complete housing of the fresh element or higher



yielding cows is more preferable than housing the complete herd at night.”

Although grouping cows will not suit every herd, it is a vital element to ensuring profitability this summer. If herd size does not facilitate this it will be more preferable to graze cows rather than house them.

“On no account should a complete herd be housed due to its size or status, which dictates a small batch of high-yielding cows giving more than 35 litres. Thompsons’ Milk Manager recording system shows that the inefficient use of feed is always on low yielding, over-fed cows,” adds Mr Black.

Irrespective of which system of milk production is implemented, Mr Black recommends a couple of key parameters that are crucial to ensuring profitability in these difficult financial circumstances.

The first is to grow top quality forage whatever the system. For most producers grass and grass silage is still the most important feed, and this means timely applications of fertiliser, slurry and lime (if required), regular reseeding, and looking for quality before quantity when cutting silage.

And feed your cows to maximise your forage potential. That means getting low-yielders out at grass full-time, where possible. If you have fresh-calved high yielders you may not want to graze them but keep an eye on feed rates and make sure they justify their indoor berth.

Irrespective of what level of performance is being achieved and what system of milk production you choose, question where you are and aim to improve forage performance, as this will ultimately improve profit.

When the current price of concentrates is factored into the milk price:feed price ratio we see that 2011 has the potential to inflict difficult financial circumstances if cow potential is not maximised and the yields achieved for each system do not match costs. |



James Black: “Grass has the potential to produce more than 20 litres of milk in a grazing system”



Jason McMinn: “High concentrate prices mean that it will not be profitable to house lower yielding cows by day or night”